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For lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone:
the flowers appear on the earth;
the time of the singing of birds is come
and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land:

Song of Solomon 2:11-12

APRIL - MAY 1974

naturalist notebook

EXPLORING FIELDS, PONDS, AND WOODLAND SWAMPS IN SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT

In the April-May issue of *Naturalist Notebook,* we are going to look as closely as explorers would as we walk through specific habitats — look up, look down, listen as you walk, and enjoy the natural areas here in Southeastern Connecticut. Think about your neighborhood, your town or city. One very basic part of this human environment is *home.* Your home environment is a unit in itself, different from other homes, but similar enough to be part of the larger pattern of residences. HABITATS are homes of different organisms, and in the homes of these different organisms are NICHES.

This issue was compiled by Kathie Haeni, Katy Knox, Barbara Kashanski, Jo Merrill, and Shelley White, editor . . . We hope you will carry it along with you to help increase your appreciation of the woodlands, swamps, and ponds.

LIFE IN A FIELD

Life in a field is a complex community where you will find a familiar friend, the dandelion. This plant is a native of Greece and is a perennial, which means it will come up year after year. On warmer days and into summer, you will certainly find some plantains. One has narrow leaves sprouting from its base and is called lance-leaf plantain or buckhorn plantain. The other is a broadleaf plantain and is similar to the lance-leaf except that its leaves are broader and larger and the flowering spike is longer.

This field is the home of a community of plants and animals. At first glance the field may look lifeless, but you will soon notice birds and insects, chickweeds, grasses, and taller weeds growing in the field, most often bounded by stone walls here in Connecticut — a field is always changing! As the years pass, the field, once a

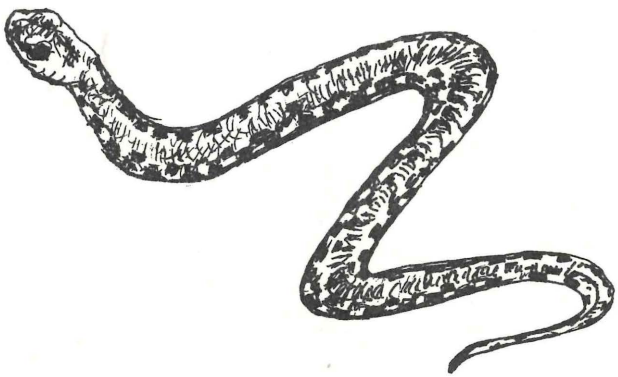
pasture, changes as other plants spring up — like berry bushes, shrubs, and quick-growing trees such as sumac and tree seedlings. Eventually, if the field is undisturbed, the trees become so big that their shade keeps many smaller plants from getting sunlight for growth; and a forest grows!

Meadow mice live among the grasses, but when the grasses become sparse, deer mice replace them. Meadow larks and killdeer nest and feed in open fields; and when the larger plants take over, song sparrows, catbirds, and cardinals live among the saplings and shrubs. There is so much to learn in the fields around us! And much to be learned about the changes of plant life (called plant succession) in Southeastern Connecticut.

You will notice a variety of lichens on the stones, that perhaps a farmer broke his plow on while making his pasture. Some cover the old stones like a map. Woodchucks and moles may be found spending happy lives in underground burrows.

Discover a field or vacant lot near your home! What will *you* find?

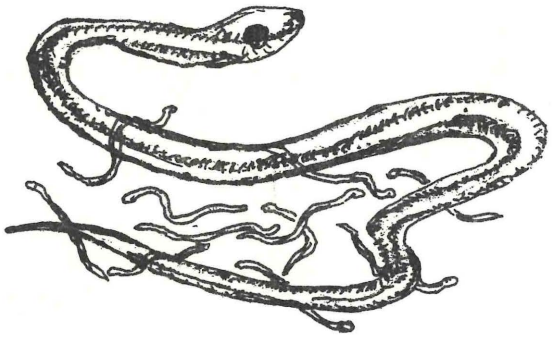
Look for a little brown snake with two rows of black spots down its back . . . It is the DeKay's or Northern Brown Snake and lives in these open lots, fields, and woods. This small reptile seldom reaches 12 or 13 inches in length and is very shy and secretive, preferring to hide under something rather than venturing forth into the open.



THE WOODLAND SWAMP

A swamp is a type of wetland that is characterized by certain trees, shrubs, and mosses. (In forests, where there is a natural basin or depression which fills seasonally with water and stays moist most of the year, the red maple forms the forest canopy.) The shrub layer below is filled with spicebush whose yellow flowers reflect against the still unopened blossoms of the other trees and shrubs. The ground cover is green with mosses, high in moisture-absorbing qualities, that grow at the base of trees and cover the rocks. They are sphagnum and broom mosses, which if you kneel down to examine carefully will reveal their tiny spore capsules.

In this woodland swamp, which is usually a dark, shaded, secretive, and secluded spot for most of the year, there is in April a great deal of noise and activity. The first sound to be heard is the strange guttural quacking-like call of the wood frog, one of our first amphibians to come out of hibernation. Day and night the wood frog's call can be heard. It is often possible to see this light brown singer with a dark mask across his eyes, floating on the surface of the water. If the singing stops as you approach, continue closer to the water's edge and stand perfectly still, and it will soon start up again. Masses of jelly-covered small black eggs are usually attached to a twig soon after the mating ritual. Hatching into tadpoles and developing into frogs has to



proceed rapidly in swamps, before the water level gets too low and threatens the immature frogs with drying out.

The breeding grounds of the spring peepers are: open fields; roadside ditches; flooded meadows or any catch basin that fills with excess rain water. This tiny frog, whose voice is much larger than his body, can be heard during the evening hours. Take a flashlight, and an adequate supply of patience, and follow your ears, and see if you can find this little frog with the big voice. It is not easy, for it is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The spring peeper is only ¼ of an inch long and is beautifully camouflaged. Usually the peeper clings to a blade of grass or sedge right at the water's edge. *"Pe-rep"* is the song the male peeper sings when air is brought from its lungs and vibrates through the vocal cords in his throat—the quivering cords produce the *Pe-rep. "Pe-Rep-pe-rep"*— have you heard them? Have you seen them?

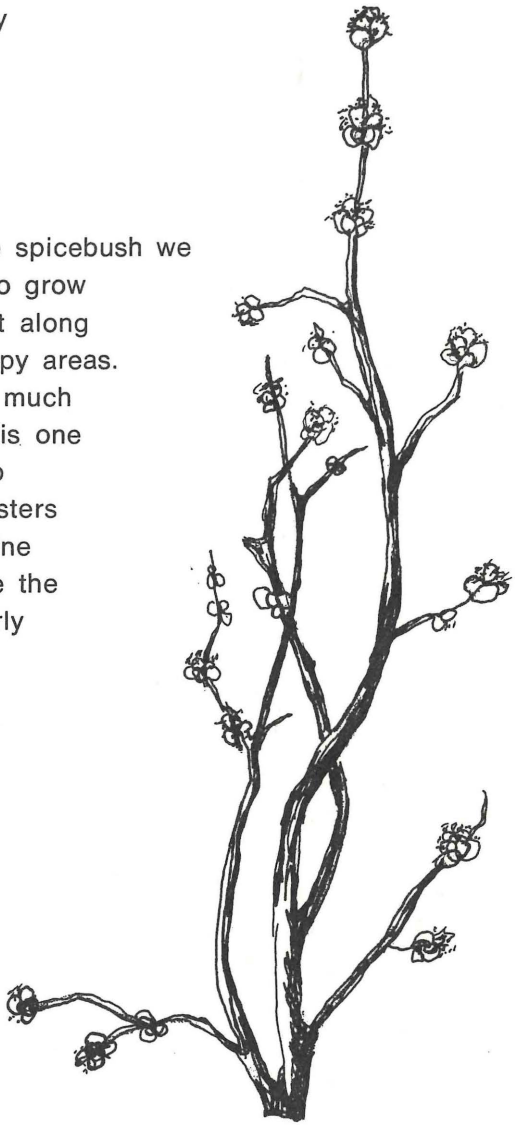
See if you can spot a spotted salamander! He is very shy about his emergence from hibernation. Like a wood frog, he heads toward the woodland swamp in search of a mate. The courtship ritual of these lovely dark creatures with yellow spots consists of a slow circling dance which is eventually concluded by mating.

Look again at this same woodland swamp where the peeper sings and find the skunk cabbage. Usually growing there too you will find false hellebore (Indian poke). The two are often confused; do not mistake them. Hellebore is poisonous and skunk cabbage is not. Hellebore has parallel veins and is a member of the lily family, while the leaves of the skunk cabbage have branched veining and are more heartshaped.

A common shrub of wet areas, stream and pond banks, and the edge of the swamp is witch hazel. This shrub has all its seasons reversed. When most trees and shrubs are bursting into bloom in the spring, the witch hazel calmly puts out its new set of leaves. Not until November when the frost is on the ground and its leaves

have fallen does this strange shrub put forth an array of spidery yellow flowers. This is also the time that the seed pods, which have been developing since last fall, suddenly explode sending their seeds amazing distances. Watch out if you are walking near them at this time of year! Witch hazel has been used since Indian times as a cure for many ailments — you might even have extract of witch hazel now in your medicine closet.

Like the witch hazel, the spicebush we mentioned earlier, likes to grow where its "feet" stay wet along streambeds and in swampy areas. But its blooming time is much more normal. Actually it is one of the very first shrubs to bloom in the spring. Clusters of small yellow flowers line the bare branches before the leaves appear. In the early part of this country's history, the leaves of the spicebush were used as a substitute for tea. In revolutionary times, the housewife would grind the berries into a powder and use it for allspice. Crush a leaf and smell the wonderful aromatic odor.



LIFE IN THE POND

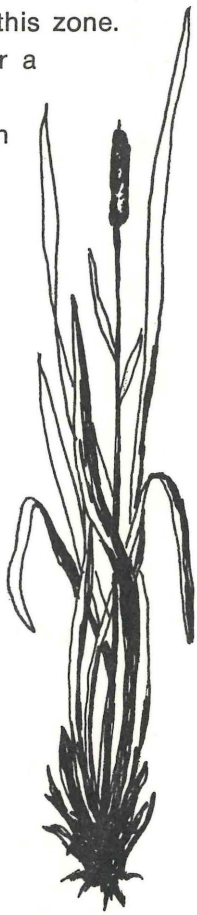
A pond is a shallow, rather small body of standing water with a uniform temperature throughout, give or take a few degrees. It is impossible to predict what species of animals and plants will be found in a given pond, but different sorts of organisms survive successfully in each of the particular habitats that exist there.

In the *littoral* or shore zone, there are various kinds of plants arranged according to their tolerance for the depth and movements of the water. Such plants are cattails (which stand high and prominent above the bur reeds), arrowheads, loosestrifes, floating pond weeds, and water lilies. The surface film, too, supports its own plant and animal life, the *neuston.* The surface film is the habitat of air-breathing floating animals and of animals with special devices that permit them to walk on the surface of the water. Look at the shiny black whirligig beetles — have you seen them swimming round and round rapidly in circles on the surface of a pond? Their short middle and hind legs propel them in their circles and are also used for diving. Their eyes are in two parts so that this comical beetle can see above and below the water at the same time. Can you spot a water strider? He does indeed stride as he moves silently atop the pond.

As you approach the pond, you can see the distinct zones of vegetation, running more or less parallel to its shoreline. You pass through a thicket of young trees and shrubs: alders, willow, and buttonbush. Here also grow marsh marigolds, grasses where waterfowl nest, horsetail, water mint, sedges, and

rushes. The soil is marshy and spongy with saturated organic matter. Little standing water is visible; but as you step across the damp marsh soil, water squishes beneath your feet. The shallow water around the pond extends around the roots and stems of a variety of shoreline plants. This is the beginning of the *littoral* zone. Common plants here are iris (blue flag), bur reed, spike rush, water dock, reed grass, and more bulrushes and sedges. They are still largely land plants, and only small portions of their stem are beneath the water.

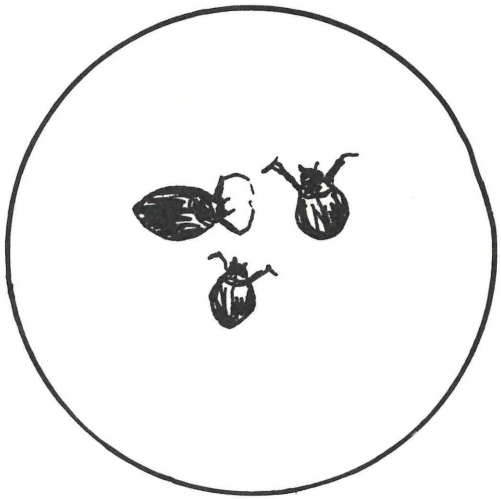
Crayfish, muskrats, frogs, and water snakes live in this zone. Look for a heron amid the tall reeds searching for a frog. Floating on the water are white water lilies, crowding out other floating plants. In this profusion of floating leaves there also may be some of the world's smallest flowering plants, duckweed and watermeal. They are not rooted to the bottom but simply float at the surface in the quiet coves.

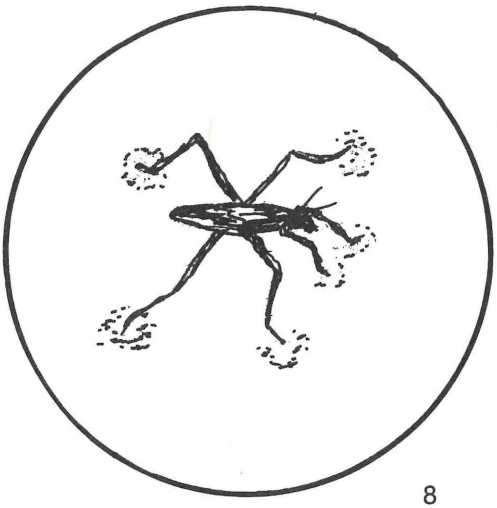


Beyond these floating plants, there is nothing but open water. Out there in the *limnetic* zone are the plankton feeders such as shiners and larger predacious fish. Mergansers swim low in the water, diving frequently beneath the surface to capture fish, frogs, and freshwater mussels. Out here, there is still plant growth; but most of it is well below the surface. The plants that grow here seldom reach the air, except to produce flowers. Such plants are: the pondweed; water celery; water milfoil; fanwort; and bladderwort. How extensive the zone is depends entirely on how transparent the water is.

Animals feed among the submerged plants, but not as they do in the shoreward zones; and aquatic insects are not as abundant here as they are close to the shore. Crayfish are common and share the region with a variety of fishes — largemouth bass, yellow perch, and bullheads.

Herons and kingfishers fish in shallow water, bottom insects crawl up aquatic stems, snails rasp away at the algal coating on rooted aquatic plants, small crustaceans feed upon planktonic plants, fish seize and eat aquatic insect larvae, worms on the bottom extract organic matter from the mud, and many one-celled animals remove bacteria and algae suspended from the water.





The bottom has its characteristic flora and fauna, the *benthos.* In the deepest portion of the pond, there are living things unlike any seen around the shore's edge. This situation is due partly to a lack of light. This means that on the bottom very little photosynthesis goes on; and as a result, the oxygen content of the water is low.

Even so, animals living there have some advantages. Because of the dim light a vulnerable bottom dweller cannot be seen easily and has every opportunity to burrow and hide. It does not have to use much energy in moving about; it can spend most of its time resting quietly or walking slowly. Food is plentiful — the bottom is rich in fine detritus and larger organic particles, and dead animals continually rain down from above.

Is it really possible to see all of these amazing happenings? Oh yes, by quiet observation — study the pond.

Shhhh . . . see the dragonfly motionless over the water . . .

APRIL, MAY, AND EARLY JUNE CONNECTICUT WILD PLANTS AND FLOWERS

EVERGREEN GROUND COVERS

TRAILING ARBUTUS: A tiny fragrant evergreen, 4 to 5 inches high.

BEARBERRY: A trailing shrub with waxy white flowers in May and June. The fruit is dull red.

DOGTOOTHED VIOLET or YELLOW ADDER'S TONGUE: The trout lily grows 6 to 10 inches high and has a single nodding lilylike flower. It is a ground cover, though not evergreen, and is found in moist woods. The leaves are pale green and mottled with purple. You will see many trout lilies along the brook's edge during the trout-fishing season.

FLOWERS FOUND ON DRY LEDGES

EARLY SAXIFRAGE: The stem of this flower is hairy and light in color. Each small flower has 5 white petals and 10 yellow stamens and is about 4 inches tall. Early saxifrage later grows up to be 12 to 16 inches tall and is also found in fields.

FLOWERS FOUND IN RICH AND ROCKY WOODS

HEPATICA: You will recognize the hepatica by the clustered fuzzy hairs on stems and bud. No two clusters are alike, and their color varies from white to lilac to blue. New flowers will open while last year's leaves still cover the roots. It is one of our earliest spring flowers.

DUTCHMAN'S BREECHES: The sage-green leaves of the plant have three parts 5 to 9 inches tall and are deeply and raggedly cut. The thin flower stalk has 4 to 8 pairs of white breeches hanging upside down (as if on a line to dry).

BLOODROOT: Growing on rocky slopes as well as along stream beds, you might notice large patches of bloodroot. The showy single flower is atop an orange stem 6 to 12 inches long. The stem and root produce a red-orange juice when broken.

VIRGINIA SPRING BEAUTY: This pink spring beauty blooms in carpeting masses and has shiny grasslike leaves. The blossoms are so fragile they close if the weather is cloudy or cold. Spring beauty grows 4 to 12 inches tall.

WHITE TRILLIUM: This radiant white flower 2 to 3 inches across is made up of three parts. This plant grows to 15 inches high and gives off a sweet-smelling odor. Look for this beautiful wild flower on the floor of our rich moist woods.

NODDING TRILLIUM: This trillium grows in acid woods and the white flower nods its head below the three umbrella-shaped leaves. The fruit is a dark red berry.

CANADA VIOLET: This one of many violets has leafy stems and many flowers and is found growing in deep woods 8 to 10 inches high. The center of the violet flower is yellow and fragrant.

FLOWERS OF THE BROOK, MARSH AND POND

MARSH MARIGOLD: The marsh marigold grows along brooks and in wet meadows and swamps, and sometimes in a swiftly-flowing stream! This brilliant yellow waxy-looking flower is sometimes called cowslip. The plant grows in a clump and often reaches as high as 2 feet.

WILD CALLA or WATER ALUM: Growing in swamps and bogs, the wild calla grows to 5 to 10 inches high and has dark green heart-shaped leaves. The spathe is often mistaken for the flower. The upper surface is green and lower down a waxy white. The true flowers are clustered together under the spathe at the end of the greenish spadix.

PITCHER PLANT: The pitcher plant has narrow pitcherlike leaves 2 to 4 inches long that fill with rain water. The leaf is lined with hairs to trap insects. The single rose-purple flower is about 2 inches broad. The pitcher plant can only be found in sphagnum moss bogs.

FLOWERS FOUND IN FIELDS, MEADOWS, AND OPEN WOODS

AMERICAN COLUMBINE: The delicate flowers of American columbine hang upside down and are like soft scarlet organdy bells. *Columba* is the Latin word for dove, and it has always been thought the gentle flowers resemble doves. The leaves grow at the bottom of the plant and the flower towers above them.

NATIVE ORCHIDS OF SPRING

PINK LADYSLIPPER: This orchid is also called a moccasin flower. The pink of the lower part of the flower is puffed out as if it were the toe of a slipper. Each plant has only one stem and flower and has two oval leaves 6 to 8 inches long.

SPRING LADIES' TRESSES: The ladies' tresses grow in wet woodlands and bogs along our coasts. The slender stem is from 6 to 36 inches long and the flowers are white or yellow-white. Each flower is about ½ inch long and close together — and is most fragrant.

SOME SUGGESTED FIELD TRIPS

Where do you begin to find that shaded woodland swamp you have just read about? And what about the spring peepers you hear? You probably have a roadside ditch or flooded meadow in your neighborhood, but you also have in this unique area of Southern New England, many habitats where you can investigate nature and explore with some of the information and tips we have written about in this issue of *Naturalist Notebook.* Listed below are some parks, forests, and sanctuaries where you can find fields, swamps, streams, and ponds. This issue may help you discover them!

BARN ISLAND (Bird Sanctuary): Barn Island is east of Stonington off Route 1 at the head of Wequetequock Cove. There is an overhead stoplight at the intersection of Greenhaven Road and Route 1. At this point go east on Greenhaven Road and immediately go right on Palmer Neck Road south to the boat-launching area, where you may park. There are roads and trails east through the marsh in upland meadows, fields, and woods. Habitats: thickets, salt and fresh water ponds, marshes, swamps, fields, and woodlands.

BLUFF POINT: On Route 1 in Groton, travel along Fort Hill Road; and as you pass over the Poquonock River just east of Trumbull Airport, there is a stoplight, at which point you go south on North Road. This will take you to a parking area near the railroad where you can walk to the ruins of the home of the first governor of Connecticut. They lay neglected on this beautiful and last-remaining forested natural area on the Connecticut east coast. The house, built in the mid-1600s, remains as ruins on abandoned fields on the summit of the point. The foundation of the house, which remained until 1960 when it was burned by vandals, now contains the remains of a massive chimney. High bluffs and boulders face south, and you can look east to a sandpit and Bushy Point.

CONNECTICUT COLLEGE ARBORETUM AND THAMES SCIENCE CENTER NATURE TRAIL: Opposite Connecticut College on Williams Street are 350 acres that make up the Connecticut College Arboretum. In April the shadbush will be in bloom, and in May,

the dogwoods. There are winding semi-wild trails throughout the Arboretum. As you descend into the woods from Williams Street, there is a wildflower garden on your left. You will find a pond, swamp, many rocky outcroppings, and interesting native trees and shrubs. The back part of the Arboretum is a natural area established in 1952. The area is left unmanaged and consists of a lovely woodland, a ravine, and thickets and fields in succession. Habitats: woodland, pond, and swamps.

DENISON PEQUOT-SEPOS: This sanctuary is south of Route 95 off the Jerry Brown Road in Mystic. There is a trailside museum and a special fern trail, ponds, swamps, brooks, and labeled plant species. Spring wild flowers will be in abundance, and warblers will be flitting through the woods. This was the Pequot's brook, and hence the name "Pequot-sepos."

FORT SHANTOK STATE PARK: In Montville on the east side of Route 32 is this state park situated on the site of a Mohegan Indian village and the fort of Uncas. There is an old burial ground on the high bluffs above the Thames River; fields, woods, and a brook; picnic tables; and a great deal of Indian history to ponder while there. Habitats: open fields and woodlots.

LANTERN HILL: This high hill is situated in North Stonington. In colonial days the summit was used as a beacon to aid the navigation of sailing vessels offshore: this silica hill is the highest point of land (500 feet above sea level)! At the intersection of Route 2 and 214 in North Stonington, travel east on Route 2 and go south on Wintechog Road almost immediately. Two miles south on Wintechog Hill Road you will find blue trail markers and ascend into wet woods and catch basins, to woods and the crest of the hill. From the crest, you can see Block Island, R. I., and Montauk Point, Long Island, 18 miles offhore. Lantern Hill is of great interest to geologists and also to naturalists. Dwarf vegetation is on the crest.

NEHANTIC FOREST: "Nayantaquit" was the name of the Indian tribe that lived in this parcel of land before the white man came, and it probably means "point of land on a tidal river." This forest is in East Lyme, Lyme, and Salem, and is an area 3,325 acres.

There are two ponds with familiar names, Uncas and Norwich, and a boat-launching area. To get to the Nehantic Forest, take Route 156 north to Hamburg. A rich aquatic habitat!

PACHAUG FOREST: There are 22,389 acres in this forest which is in Voluntown and North Stonington. The state road map can help you locate various parts of this park, but the best way to get there is to go to Route 49 in North Stonington, and stop at the Ranger station at the intersection of Rt. 138 on the left. There are many hiking trails, two ponds, Beach Pond and Green Hill Pond as well as two great stands of rhododendrons. There are many unusual botanical and geologic specimens to be found here in Pachaug, which means in Indian "the turning place in the river". Mt. Misery, the highest part of the forest 441 feet, is bald rock and below, the trail drops to a brook. There are eskers (sand and gravel ridges left by the last glacier) and Kettle holes in the streams. The Narragansett, Nehantic and Pachaug trails cross through this forest — the largest of our Connecticut State Forests.

PEACE SANCTUARY: Maintained by the Thames Science Center this sanctuary is located in Mystic along the river. Traveling east on Route 95 exit at the Allyn Street exit and go east on Bindloss Road and then south on River Road. This woodland is the habitat of many birds (perhaps maybe Doves) and wild flowers.

PEQUOT WOODS PARK: Driving east on Rt. 95 take Allyn Street exit in Mystic and immediately go right on Sandy Hollow Road. A small parking lot on the left marks the entrance into the woods. The trail crosses a brook and with open pastures to a clearing. Hellebore and Marsh Marigolds should be growing in abundance in this wet lush area which has just been acquired by the State of Connecticut.

FEBRUARY-MARCH
FIELD NOTES

Although spring doesn't officially arrive in February, there are the first indications that the plants and animals are beginning to stir. On February 1 a male *SHOVELLER* was seen in Groton, and on the 2nd the *SKUNK CA*BBAGE was blooming in the Arboretum. From Niantic reports came in that two *CATBIRDS* were seen on the first. Three *SNOW BUNTINGS* were sighted at the East Lyme Junior High School on the 8th, and on the 13th a *ROBIN* was reported. Our first report of *RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS* came on the 14th from this area, and on the 16th two *MONK PARROTS* were seen. Four *EASTERN MEADOWLARKS* were seen on February 28. These probably wintered here. Waterford area had *REDWINGS* on February 18 and *SNOWDROPS* blooming on the 21st.

On March 7, *WOOD FROGS* were heard; and on that same date *WATER STRIDERS* were seen. On the 23rd *SPRING PEEPERS* were heard. On the 24th, a *CAROLINA WREN* was reported. The 25th brought word that *SPOTTED SALAMANDER* eggs had been discovered. On the 27th a *PHOEBE* was seen but not heard — too cold to sing! *WOOD FROG* eggs were found in a woodland pool on the 27th. Two *OSPREYS* were seen at the nesting site at Millstone on the 29th — good news! *GADWALL* could be found this whole month at Harkness marsh.

Reports from New London were that on the 2nd a *LONG-EARED OWL* was seen in the Arboretum. Mitchell Woods produced *CROSSBILLS* working on the cones in the *RED PINES* on the 15th; and on the 18th, a *HERMIT THRUSH* was heard in these woods.

Old Lyme reported *REDPOLLS* on the 15th, eight *SNOW GEESE* on the 17th, and *BONAPARTE'S, LITTLE,* and *BLACKHEADED GULLS* on the 19th — nice collection! A *WOODCOCK* was flushed in East Haddam March 11th.

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BIRD SONGS OF SPRING

May is the season to rise before dawn and be out in the woods as the sun is rising, for this is the month when birds, especially wood warblers, are going home to their nesting grounds. Because birds have such a high metabolism, they must feed early, rest in the middle of the day, and feed again late in the afternoon, especially those who are migrating at night.

As you walk through the woods, your ears are tantalized by the singing. You wish that your ears would remember the songs you learned the year before, because then you would be more sure what was in the tops of the trees, half hidden by the emerging leaves. But you hear the "beee-buzz" of the Blue-winged Warbler which will nest here. The high pitch "weesee" of the pristine Black and White Warbler leads you to look for movement on the tree trunks as it climbs about looking for insects. A Parula Warbler turns up, picking the aphids off the sticky maple buds, its yellow throat and blue back with its greenish triangle making it easy to identify. A pair of Redstarts dart through the trees, the male with his black body, white belly and orange patches on wing and tail, chasing his gray lady love who has yellow patches where his are orange. A "witchery-witchery" call lower down leads you to a nesting Yellow Throat, nicknamed the "masked bandit" because of its black mask. And on the top of a cedar tree you find a Prairie Warbler singing his heart out in an ascending cascade of joy, almost too high pitched to hear, his yellow underparts streaked on the side and glowing in the sun.

By the middle of May, if you were to rise before dawn and go birding until dusk the chances are that you would see over one hundred birds in this area. You have to look along the shores and out to sea, as well as inland, and be able to identify birds accurately. Roger Tory Peterson's *FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS* in your pocket and a pair of binoculars around your neck are indispensable!

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THAMES SCIENCE CENTER

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